

Content Design for e-Learning in Malaysia: Visual & Performing Arts

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Introduction

Digitisation work on Malay arts at University Malaya is presently a research under the name *E-seni* (E-arts) carried out by a team of academicians under the Department of Malay Arts of the Academy of Malay Studies under the auspices of the University. In 2007 the research was awarded bronze medal at a national exhibition of Malaysian Technology Exposition (MTE 2007) held over four days between March to April of that year at the Putera World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

This paper is an examination of its potential for the E-learning mode. I would like to highlight participants that the mode of electronic learning is the main thrust of universities in the country operating on the open university concept of learning. The first is OUM (Open University Malaysia) which started in 2004. Another private university, Universiti Wawasan started 2007, presumably also following the open concept. For open universities its main business is to offer degrees to working students who may have difficulty of scheduled timetables for learning as well as the factor of geographical distance from the institution concerned.

E-learning for University Malaya was only properly activated in 2006 when the module was included into the technological support system of the university. It is still at the stage of training for academicians of the University. Student need to be addressed and taught the mode as well. Therefore there is the initial process of familiarization of the E-learning mode for all concerned. But being one of the first to attend its introductory course of familiarization, I was happy to note how the research our team are carrying out on the digitisation of Malay Arts somehow seem tailor made to fit into the mode of E-learning.

Digitisation Of Malay Arts

Our paper therefore hopes to cover two areas of interest in this conference. The first is to inform and highlight upon the project which is basically a digitisation effort aimed at documenting all the Malay visual and performance arts forms to culminate in a complete and comprehensive database on the two genres. The second is to emphasize the importance of digitisation of knowledge for the E-learning mode.

The digitisation process culminates in constructing a database on Malay arts knowledge. Compact discs on individual Malay art forms is another business of the research which is mainly aimed at facilitating a fast and efficient retrieval of knowledge on the arts of the Malay world for everyone and sundry. The research would expedite the learning and teaching of Malay Arts be it for the E-learning or normal mode of face-to-face contact thus paving the way for a more structured and progressive study pragmatically, creatively and technologically. Indeed the study is very forward looking albeit ambitious one but for the team, being in the forefront of the Malay Arts as a department, it presents an opportunity to reconstruct and encapsulate the many variables of Malay art forms in a

foolproof yet exciting way by using textual and visual means in a chosen module for multiple ways of the learning process.

Explanation Of The Project

The team for the research project is based on a prescribed objective as follows:

To enable a concerted and focused research based on prescribed formats and modules. Each member would be filling in the module according to their expertise areas. Input of data are coordinated and counterchecked to ascertain originality and specificity as required in the module. The aim is to ensure correct and conclusive input of data. The team leader of the project has provided a simple guide on the fulfillment of modules to allow a more efficient work procedure.

To fulfill the need of providing an audio-visual treat as a teaching-learning provision in the study of Malay Arts – visual arts genre and performance arts genre. This would be an enhancement as well as an exciting alternative to simple teacher to student lectures. With this end in mind the research is geared into two type of output: i) interactive CDs, and, ii) E-Seni, a compilation into database format on Malay Arts. The output would concern the classification of Malay Arts into genre and forms as well as types. The result is to maximise learning of knowledge in this one field and allows for a more interact-based learning process.

To maximise expertise in the department of Malay Arts and gear members toward a research that would fulfill their role and enable the sharing of knowledge on Malay Arts via the latest technological platform.

To create a commercial website and market the product of the research to students, institutions, and researchers of the arts. The website would be the property of University Malaya, the financier of the project.

More so the project aims to reach Malay Arts knowledge to the general public. On the intellectual level it offers an opportunity at internationalization of knowledge.

Finally, the project must be kept ongoing in order to enable supervision, upgrading and updating of data, and generally maintaining the website. In short the project is not a one-stop project, rather this is a start to a concerted effort at building and updating upon the database and improving upon it.

In summarizing what the team at the Department of Malay Arts, Academy of Malay Studies aspires to achieve is to keep abreast with the technological advancement of our times and use the mode of Information Communication Technology (ICT) to empower the teaching and learning of Malay Arts for everyone. Given the team's limited knowledge with the world of computerization and programming this means attending courses relevant to fulfilling leadership as well as work needs, but with the understanding that the main job of programming and extensive editing would have to get the relevant expertise; because only then can the research culminate successfully.

Process Of Research

This research would involve phases of work in progress as follows:

Identifying the Information Tree Regarding Malay Arts

Considering the Modules and Guides

Preparing the Templates
 Conducting Research
 Composing the Text, Glossary and Biography Based On the Modules
 Editing the Text
 Inserting Text into the Templates
 Editing Pictures, Video and Music
 Inserting Pictures, Audio and Video Clips into the Templates
 Completing the CD Cover
 Translating the Text into Other Languages
 Conducting the Voice Over
 Preparing the Tutorials and Interactive Games
 Inquiring the Copyright and Producing CDs
 Marketing the Interactive CDs
 Transferring the Data into a Database
 Designing a Web Site for the Database

Work Ongoing

The team has the added mileage of having good knowledge of Malay Arts, they being academia in the given areas and this was what actually spawned the research idea for the first named paper presenter who also acted as the group leader. At a departmental meeting everyone was keen on the idea simply because to mount one lecture usually involve much segmental preparation of teaching aid usually bordering on audio involving cassettes and CDs and players, and visual ascertions using various modes from television to computer or just pictures all of which is given over and above the actual lecture.

As mentioned, executing the research work was done in various phases. The first step was categorization and classification of the Malay Arts visual and performance forms which was then named the *sulur info* or information tree and this became the team's structural prototype (see Appendix II showing sample). From the information tree each member of the team chooses one form at a time to create a databank pertaining to the form before processing it into a synthesized database using the set module already agreed upon by the team. Understandably this part of the work, for all team members, is the most challenging yet satisfying.

Systematizing The Module

Data about each form is identified into a systematic module or format as follows:

Definition

History

Technique and Materials Used

Aesthetics

Ethics

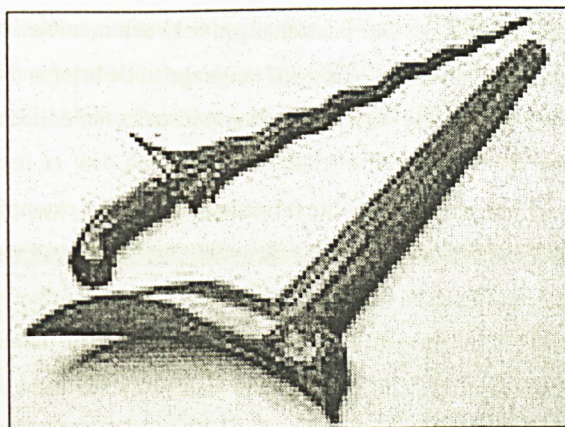
Function

Symbolism

By definition the team would have to adhere to compact and concise statements that initiates understanding of an art form. The history part would inculcate an exposition of its history and expansion or regeneration. For this aspect data given priority are those based on formal research, usually at the Masters and Doctorate levels; in the absence of which would offer new research openings for a prospective student. Factors of origin, evolution and current development is the focus for this section.¹¹

The third portion of the module is the technique and materials used in the art form. Based upon its history the portion treating the technique and materials used would encompass its phases of transformation and regeneration. From there the focus into aesthetics, ethics, functions, and symbols of the art forms would systematically be the team's prescriptives. All content aspects of the four portions of the module need to be formatted in concise and compact discription and analysis. Sometimes this involve separating an art form into various components based on its complexity. The *keris* as a Malay weapon and a work of art is one such example. As an art form *keris* for the Malay world epitomizes artistry in craftsmanship. Each segment of the *keris* from the blade to the handle and the scabbard is crafted separately and they have to be projected as such (see picture). So also with many other art forms which by virtue of its vibrance must need be divided significantly into various segments to fully realize the idea of digitisation and moduling.

¹¹ For example, in the case of the first writer of this paper, she had done research on the Boria performance form for her doctor of philosophy between 1974 to 1977 and in the study it was revealed that historically boria as an art form originates from the Muharram festivals of the shi'i moslems of the Persian countries – nowadays more known as Iran and Iraq. The form as brought by Indians serving as British soldiers into the Straits Settlements which was under the rule of the British. The form was however found to be an adulturated version, merging Islamic and Hinduistic influences of religious celebration. The performance form of Shi'i celebration came with the spread of Islam to the western part of India, wherein the form transformed somewhat with the influence from various forms of ritualistic performances already in existence there. It is this admixture of Shi'i and Hinduistic celebration that was brought into Penang, where the form thrived and degenerated further into a gang warfare under the symbol of the white and red flag to denote rival factions within their groups. The Straits Settlements of that time was also beset with Chinese gang warfare also operating under the symbol of white and red flag between groups and coincidentally the same coloured flag of Indian Moslem and Chinese gangs operated in the same regions. They have been ascribed to the Racial Riot of 1867 in the Straits Settlements. For the boria this meant a turning point in its artistry for as a result of the Racial Riots of 1867 the performance of boria was legally confined to the performers' own villages. As a result the rivalry so easily provoked during processions was curbed. The boria as performed at the present time was a regeneration of the village performance of the art form, and has been ascribed to Penang as the only state within the Straits Settlements that could carry out that performance tradition under British rule. This means that in Singapore and Malacca the form is made illegal thus eliminating any possibility at propagation of boria as an art form there.



One sample of the Malay Keris

The team is very aware of the fact that treating the four components of aesthetics, ethics, functions, and symbolism of an art form is summarily related to metaphysical, magical, ritualistic and religious, and socio-cultural concerns. They are in fact features that build upon the dynamics of Malay culture and creativity.

Designing And Preparing The Template

This portion of the research phase is perhaps the most challenging one. Equipment especially technological equipment takes up a big portion of the research costing. Research assistants is another cost incurring factor as the research phases would require employing graphic designer, textual editor, visual and video editor and web caster for the research. Computers must be of high-end capacity with high memory capabilities. The team have to find the most suitable graphic software for their purpose.

Into its third active year the research has finalized on what template to use, what design, and has even come out with 10 compact discs as tryout result of the research. What needs doing is to design an interface for effortless data retrieval and for web casting. The idea is to come out with a style that is user-friendly. On the researchers' end, using a workable design would mean doing away with unwanted segments and lengthy descriptions on Malay arts.

Conducting And Realizing Research

The actual work towards input to research is done individually by each of the members in the team. In order to fill up the modules, members have to conduct a research on their own regarding the topics chosen by them from the information tree of Malay Arts. Some of the funding is applied separately from other short term research fund. Alternatively, some of the materials or data are collected from the existing findings of completed and ongoing doctoral researches.

After collecting data in the form of text, picture, music and streaming video, the co-researchers will write according to the modules. The most challenging time for us is writing on a aspects in the module that are hardly written by other academicians such as the section on symbolism, ethics, aesthetics and functions.

Upon completion of the individual work, it will be exchanged between members to be edited before handing it to the research leader. The editing phase involves the editing of language to be brief and accurate, and of facts to be precise and referred. The research leader will finally verify the text and instruct the edited softcopies of the text to be inserted in the template.

All the supporting materials will be edited using the related software. For example pictures are edited using Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop; video clips by U-lead Video Studio, Edius and music clips by Sony Sound Forge. All the data are inserted into the templates on the pages that need these supportive elements.

The CD covers are designed with an identity of similar elements such as the theme color of earth (which has been used extensively by Malay traditional artists), similar fonts and standard texts at the spine, front and back cover of the CD, as well as on the CD itself. The Malay performance art is added with another symbol, musical notes, and this notifies the difference between the Malay visual art CDs and the Malay performance ones.

Completing the abovementioned phases was an experience in itself. Starting from a general knowledge of the computer and its usage, members has attained considerable knowhow pertaining software, to succeeding in producing ten CDs, and undergoing courses on ICT. However, the completion of the research is still far away. It has a few other phases to be completed: translating the text into other languages, conducting the voice over, preparing the tutorials and interactive games, inquiring the copyright and producing more CDs, marketing the interactive CDs, and the biggest challenge of all in transferring the data into a prescribed data base and designing a web site for the output of the research.

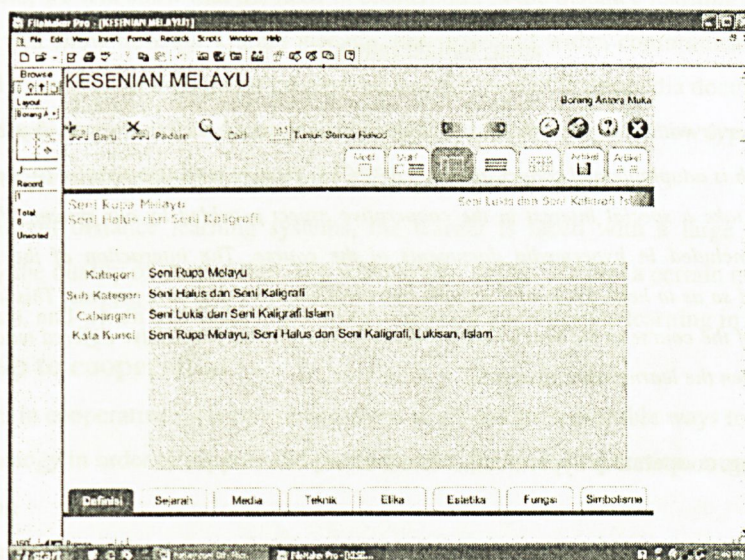
Realizing The Database

The difficult part is designing a database, of which members finally agreed on the construct of File Maker Pro. A database of Malay arts is a collection of information, or data, that have been organized, updated, thoroughly researched, retrievable and printed as needed.

One of the outstanding features in designing the database is the way of sorting the data. Designed as a filing cabinet, it features the arrangement of files according to the subtitles in the format of the interactive CDs. However, there is a slight difference between CD interactive and the database, for the database will not have games and tutorials. It adds other utilities and features such as the easy retrieval of pictures and texts. It has also a segment on academic articles inclusive of those published at the faculty of Academy of Malay Studies and papers presented in seminars and conventions. The team of researchers also came out with the idea to include glossaries related to each topic.

In order to organize the data, not only the filing system is applied in this database, it also facilitates the researcher by allowing for reviewing a subset of the data. The database does not just holding the information, but analyzing according to the selected topics and keywords. To view the records, it can be done in individual record, in list record or a spreadsheet-like table. When the user clicks on the topic of the list, as in the spreadsheet-like table, the list of information will be arranged automatically in alphabetical order. If the information is hidden for the limitation of space, the column could be resized in order to view the full information by holding the mouse at the subtopic and dragged to the right side of the column.

For the time being, the database is only shared among the researchers using the internal network. It can also be shared using the web publishing capabilities, or using ODBC (Open Database Connectivity) and JDBC (Java Database Connectivity) to share FileMaker Pro files with ODBC and JDBC compliant applications. Even though the layouts could easily be published as web pages, the researchers intended to postpone the sharing through internet because presently the database is still in construction.



Conclusion

Short and concise explanation is the work principle adopted by the team. The information format is then fitted into a serviceable data computerization program.

I must admit that there are many constraints in culminating the research and thus to fully realise the construct of each and every facet of Malay Arts into the digital mode of choice. Budget amount per annum for the research is one. Concerted effort all round among partners of the research progress is another. Plus factors about the research is the rich source on Malay Arts that are available out there be it already streamlined into graduate exercises, dissertations, and thesis or just as a proliferation of primary and secondary knowledge. We should note here that this factor also proved the stumbling block and main challenge in the process of selecting the mythic from the given knowledge, and, formatting the data into the specified module of our research. However, the research becomes promising when it opens new and neglected areas which can help post-graduate students in seeking further studies, and they are indeed encouraged to become a contributor to the research.

The research results when complete must of course be maintained and updated occasionally. This means that the research is a never ending one. But with the recent focusing on E-learning at University Malaya the research that our team has embarked on is seen to be ready made for the module of E-learning. Understanding that face-to-face contacts are still the main thrust of study at our university the modules that the research has employed would serve its purpose for E-learning foremost as an enrichment and double up as an alternative necessity if need be.